

Understanding the Trinity, part One, The Three Persons of the Trinity

Your Notes

The challenge of understanding the Trinity

- Many people believe that the idea of the Trinity is one of the most difficult to understand in the Christian faith.
- I very much disagree!
- God does not intentionally confuse us as to who He is; He desires a relationship with us.
- The challenge to understanding the Trinity is the same challenge of understanding everything else about our faith—

We need to look at what God's Word says about it!

- Which I'll help you do, so you won't simply accept the statements of "Oh, this is a mystery we can't understand."
- We will look at God's Word and the passages that specifically deal with Trinity to do this.
- This is different method of study than reading the Bible as a whole, which I recommend you do each year, but once you understand the message of the Book overall, it is valid to pull out verses on a particular topic, making certain you don't take them out of context or twist them to say something they don't say.
- The verses that I quote are not exhaustive on our topic of the Trinity but representative, as the whole Bible clearly teaches the reality of the Trinity.
- Here is our overall plan for learning about the Trinity in Three Parts.

Here is our plan

- ***Understanding the Trinity, part One, The Three Persons of the Trinity***, after an introduction on the topic overall, we will look at how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are uncreated, co-equal, and eternal persons.
- ***Understanding the Trinity, part Two, The One Substance of the Trinity***, the attributes shared by the members of the Trinity, and what that means to us.
- ***Understanding the Trinity, part Three, The Trinity Throughout the Bible***, descriptions of the Trinity and roles of each member in the Old and New Testaments.
- Notes, videos, podcasts, charts, and associated resource links are all available on www.Bible805.com

Why we need to understand the Trinity

- First, an understanding of the Trinity is important to our personal faith, our relationship with our God.
- One of the most frustrating things in any relationship is if we feel that the person we love does not understand us.
- God loves us and wants us to understand Him and He's gone to great lengths to make that possible.
- God has given us Creation, His Word, and Jesus, God incarnate—God made flesh so we can understand Him.
- So many problems of life are because we don't know our God and have false ideas about Him. This series of lessons hopes to help change that.

Second, we need to understand what is false in other religions

- A proper view of the Trinity is one of the KEY differences between Christianity and non-Christian religions such as Islam.
- It is also a key difference between the cults that are distorted interpretations of the Christian faith such as the Mormon religion and Jehovah Witness.
- All of those mentioned and all other cults and false religions have distorted, incorrect views of the Trinity, based on teaching totally in disagreement with what the Christian Bible teaches.
- In place of the Christian Trinity, other religions and cults believe in a primary God, an overall Father and....

None of them doubt or deny Jesus or a Holy Spirit exists

- ***But they do not believe Jesus is God or the Holy Spirit is God and a part of the eternal Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.***
- They say Jesus is either a lesser god, or a created part of the Godhead, such as the Mormons do.
- Or simply a revered prophet, as Muslims believe, very wise perhaps, but totally human.
- Other religions' views of the Holy Spirit are that He is always lesser than that of God the Father and they define the Holy Spirit as more of a force than a person.
- None of these opinions agree with what the Bible says about Jesus or the Holy Spirit, as you'll see.

The problem understanding the Trinity isn't only with other religions

- Most Christians don't understand the Trinity, which is why it's hard for them to spot problems with other religion's views of it.
- In addition, because most Christians don't understand it, they fall back on saying "it's too hard" or they accept what is basically a heretical view of it without thinking.

Here is one of the most common examples of *wrong thinking* about the Trinity

- It is popular to say that the Trinity is like water—that it is one substance.
- Yet it can be three, in that it can be in the form of ice, liquid, and steam.
- Though well-meaning, this is the heresy of Modalism.
- The true Trinity is NOTHING like this as you'll see.
- This and similar analogies are not truly useful, because they are incorrect and can lead to false beliefs and an example of that is.....

This view leads to Oneness Theology

A false belief held by United Pentecostal and United Apostolic Churches

This view (modalism/Oneness Pentecostal, etc.) is easily disproved with the Baptism of Jesus

In Summary

- Modalism falls apart on when you look ***at what the Bible says about our triune (3 in 1) God as was shown in the example of Jesus' baptism.***
- That is true of other incorrect views of the Trinity also, you see what's false by looking at what the Bible says.
- We won't go into the terms and definitions of various heresies about the Trinity (and there are many of them) in these lessons.
- Because though they may be useful to memorize in seminary, rather than

discuss them, we will use the oft-repeated illustration of how to spot counterfeit currency.

- **You don't study all the varieties of counterfeit; You study the REAL THING, which is what we will do in these lessons, but first an issue sometimes brought up. . . .**

The word "Trinity"

is not in the Bible

- ***Nor is the word "Bible" in the Bible nor is the word "Christianity" in the Bible.***
- There are many words we use to properly explain Biblical concepts that are not precisely in the Bible, but that are biblically correct.
- Just as reading many Bible passages helps us identify what defines a Christian, so too looking at many passages in the Bible about the Trinity will help us define it.
- To begin, let's look back in history at the person who first used the term "Trinity" to describe our God.

How Tertullian clarified the true nature of the Trinity

- He was a Roman lawyer (155-220AD) prior to becoming a Christian and leader in the church.
- As a result of his study and in response to what he believed were false views of the Trinity in his day, he coined the term, ***Trinity***, and defined it as
- ***una substantia, tres personae***
- **Meaning God is one substance, in three persons**
- I created a chart to illustrate it—

A Biblical view of the Trinity

First we'll look at

"A ONE GOD made up of three persons"

- *****WHY so hard to understand? Our world is filled with many trinities of 3 parts:***
- 1 musical trio, 3 separate players, etc.
- 1 Government, 3 branches
- 1 Board of Directors, President, VP, secretary
- All the common-sense familiarity with trinities in other areas of life, seems to disappear when the overall label is "God."
- Tertullian helped explain it in this way.....

When he separated substance and personhood because.....

- **Again, you can have a trinity of anything** that has similar characteristics or that works together in some way—a group of 3 chairs, a government with 3 parts, a trio, a group of 3 people singing together.
- ***But what makes THE TRINITY is that the Trinity that makes up our God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) is that it is unique in its substantia, its substance, the attributes of it, not just that it has 3 parts.***
- ***ONLY THE TRINITY of our GOD has the substance of omnipotence, omniscience, total truth & justice, immutability, et. al. and that substance, those attributes are shared equally and eternally by each member of the Trinity, making the Trinity of our God unique.***

Many scriptures point to this uniqueness of God...

- One example: *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. Isa. 55:8,9*
- We have thoughts, we have ways, but God's are so exponentially different than ours—it is this unique essence of who He is that makes Him God.
- The "una substantia", the One Substance, the characteristics all members of the Trinity share, deserves much more study, which we will do in Part Two of this series on the Trinity, but first, let's dig deeper into "tres personas" because this tends to be much harder to understand....at least it was for me.

First, we will define what it means to be a person, and then we'll see how this applies to the Trinity

- **Definition of personhood:** *The state or condition of being a person, having those qualities that confer distinct individuality and the personal identity of a persisting entity.*
- **Those qualities include—**
- **Personal relations** – *the ability to interact with others*
- **Intellect** – *the ability to form independent thoughts, to be aware of those thoughts*
- **Emotions**—*the opposite of no affect (as in Deism), interacting in "I-Thou" relationships, specifically experiencing emotions of love, hate, sadness, joy*
- **Will** – *volition, the self-generated ability to act*

More on personhood

- **What a PERSON is not:** a person is not a force, influence, solar object, or a myth as in many other religions.
- Or in theology, it's not *modes of existence*.
- **Personhood is more than form—and can be corporeal or incorporeal—having or not having a body.**
- This is very important because the Father and the Holy Spirit are not corporeal—they do not have bodies but are clearly persons as defined by the characteristics we just talked about.
- This isn't some weird, vague, hard to understand thing as you'll see, it's how the members of the Trinity are clearly portrayed in the Bible.

That we could do this was surprising to me. . . .

- When I first studied the Trinity, I thought of Jesus as a Person, but that God the Father and the Holy Spirit are also persons was not something I understood—
- Let's look at how that understanding changed for me **by looking at verses that clearly identify the characteristics of personhood mentioned previously of personal relationships, intellect, emotions, and will for EACH member of the Trinity.**
- We will list the characteristic and then quote verses in the Bible that clearly describe it.
- **Note on this**—like so many questions or confusion we have over seemingly complex issues—we need to carefully read/study God's Word to figure

them out—but the answers are THERE.

God the Father

- **Engages in personal relationships:** The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. (*John 3:35*)
- **Intellect:** Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! (*Matt. 6:8*)
- **Emotions:** But you, O Lord, are a God of compassion and mercy, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness. (*Ps. 86:15*)
- **Will:** For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. (*Matthew 12:50*)

God the Son

- **The Son engages in personal relations with God and people:** Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and prayed, "Father, I'm grateful that you have listened to me. I know you always do listen, but on account of this crowd standing here I've spoken so that they might believe that you sent me." (*John 11:41–42*)
- **Intellect:** But Jesus didn't trust them, because he knew all about people. No one needed to tell him about human nature, for he knew what was in each person's heart. (*John 2:24–25*)
- **Emotions:** He taught in their meeting places, reported kingdom news, and healed their diseased bodies, healed their bruised and hurt lives. When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. (*Matt. 9:36 MSG*)
- Jesus wept. (*John 11:35*)
- Having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end. (*John 13:1*)
- **Will:** Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done. (*Luke 22:42*)

God the Holy Spirit

- **The Holy Spirit engages in personal relations:** The Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and walk along beside the carriage." (*Acts 8:29, NLT*)
- **Intellect:** And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will. (*Rom. 8:27, NLT*)
- **Emotions:** But they rebelled against him and grieved his Holy Spirit. So, he became their enemy and fought against them. (*Isa. 63:10, NLT*)
- And do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, he has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption. (*Eph. 4:30, NLT*)
- **THINK of that—we can make the Holy Spirit sad.**
- **Will:** It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have. (*1 Cor. 12:11, NLT*)

All three are persons, having the characteristics of personhood.

Yet their personhood is unique as all the persons of the

Trinity are God

The Father is God

Jesus, God the Son, is God

The Holy Spirit is God

So far we'll shown how the members of the Trinity are separate PERSONS and all are God, how that that relate to us?

IMPORTANT—

in their interactions, particularly with humanity, each person of the Trinity has a different role

- Though they share the same characteristics, the theological term when discussing these roles is the “Economic Trinity.”
- The term “economic” in the term “Economic Trinity” comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which means, literally, “household management.” (from www.gotquestions.org).
- It is the term that describes the different roles that the members of the Trinity have, the different parts they play, while all working towards the same goals.
- We see this illustrated in different ways throughout the Bible.

Here's how it works in our salvation

- **God the Father initiates, sends** *“For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son (John 3:16).”*
- **God the Son, Jesus accomplishes the work of salvation,** *“He (Jesus) is the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 2:2).*
- **God the Holy Spirit regenerates and renews us,** *“...according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit.” (Titus 3:5).*
- And they do each of their roles/tasks together in perfect love and harmony, deferring to one another when appropriate, communicating with each other, working to glorify each other—all examples for how we should work together.

This lesson, in review, in summary

- The doctrine of the Trinity is not a mysterious, hidden teaching, but one clearly taught throughout the Bible. (and you'll see that illustrated in more detail as we go through the Bible in Lesson 3)
- In this lesson we saw how the three members of the Trinity are persons, uncreated, eternally, and equally co-existing.
- See the chart in lesson notes that summarizes the errors of both Modalism and Arianism and clearly illustrates the Trinitarian view.

Next, we'll Look at:

- ***Understanding the Trinity, part Two, The One Substance of the Trinity***, the attributes shared by the members of the Trinity, and what that means to us.
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One more thing.....

- I wonder if our questions about the Trinity aren't so much about the Trinity as about us.....
- What I mean by this is that from all eternity the three members, persons of the Trinity have existed in perfect Love, unity, oneness of purpose in peace and joy.

- In other words, it's very hard for us to imagine that kind of love and perfect interaction, so we dismiss the reality of the Trinity and that's sad because.....

The truly extraordinary reality

- ***Is that we are invited into that relationship of perfect love—not where we lose our individual personalities, but to participate in becoming all we were created to be.***
- Not only for after we die, but Jesus prayed for us and our relationships with each other in one of His last earthly prayers—
- *“I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.” John 17:20-21*
- Jesus was praying for US—for you and me and that as we work to grow in unity and love with fellow believers and our God, the world will want to join us in that.

A final reminder about the Trinity

- I pray that this study of the Trinity hasn't been a merely theological exercise, but an opportunity to get to know our God better.
- In closing, consider this trinitarian benediction from the Apostle Paul:
- *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (2 Corinthians 13:14).*
- Because, our God, the Trinity of three persons existing from all eternity have shared grace, love, and fellowship among themselves, they can now pour it out on us, invite us and our world into it.
- That's the essence of the Trinity.
- ***Now that isn't so hard to understand, is it?***

Biblical View of the Trinity

ONE GOD

ONE SUBSTANCE

All share in the same attributes,
equally and eternally

THREE PERSONS

Distinct persons eternally co-existing
Eternally sharing the same attributes

Holy

1 Samuel 2:2 There is none holy like the Lord;
there is none besides you; 1 Samuel 2:2
"Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord Almighty" – Revelation 4:8

Just

"The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just;
A God of faithfulness and without injustice,
Righteous and upright is He." Deut. 32:4

Merciful

*"The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and
great in mercy. The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are
over all His works."* Psalm 145:8-9

Love

"Love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God
and knows God. . . God is love." 1 John 4:7-8

Truth

"God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago," Titus 1:2
"And we know that the Son of God has come . . . This is the true
God and eternal life." 1 John 5:20

All-knowing, Omniscient

"You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts
from afar. . . Before a word is on my tongue you,
LORD, know it completely." Psalms 139:1-6

Everywhere, Omnipresent

"Can anyone hide himself in secret places, So I shall
not see him?" says the LORD; "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" says
the LORD. Jeremiah 23:24

All-powerful, Omnipotent

"Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by
your great power and outstretched arm.
Nothing is too hard for you." Jeremiah 32:17-18

Immutable, Unchangeable

"I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants
of Jacob, are not destroyed." Malachi 3:6

Eternal

"For thus says the One who is high and
lifted up, who inhabits eternity..." Isaiah 57:15
"To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor
and glory forever and ever. Amen." 1 Timothy 1:17

God,
The Father

God,
The Son

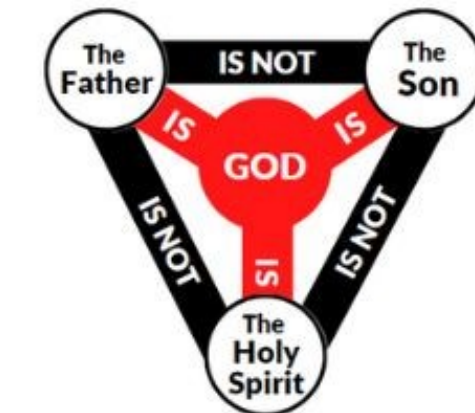
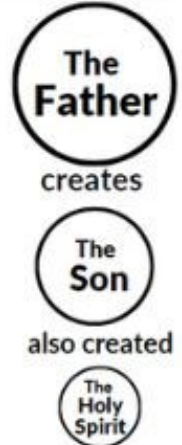
God,
The Holy Spirit

Views of the Trinity

**MODALISM
WRONG**



**ARIANISM
WRONG**



**CORRECT TRINITARIAN
Three persons, eternally co-existing**

The correct view of the Trinity illustrates three eternally co-existing persons as the center image shows.

Modalism wrongly teaches the Creator as the Father, becomes the Son, as the Savior, who then becomes the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier in the same way that water, as one substance can progressively be solid, liquid, and steam--correct regarding water, wrong regarding our Triune God.

A modern-day expression of Modalism leads to Oneness theology, a false belief held by United Pentecostal and United Apostolic Churches that believes the Father in the Old Testament became the Son in the New Testament who then became the Holy Spirit today. This false belief is easily refuted when we look at the Baptism of Jesus when all three members of the Trinity were present and many other passages in the Bible.

Arianism wrongly teaches that the Father created both the Son and Holy Spirit and incorrectly makes them noneternal lesser creations.

Modern-day beliefs influenced by Arianism include the Mormon religion and the Muslim religion in that both believe that both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are not co-eternal with God the Father.

There are many other false views of the Trinity, but rather than focus on them, the best thing to do is focus on the truth of the Trinity, one God, One Substance, Three Persons, eternally co-existing.

Discussion Questions

Understanding the Trinity, part One, The Three Persons of the Trinity

Ice-breaker—go around the group, give your name and share one thing you like to do in your free time.

1. What was your view of the Trinity before the class? Where did it come from?
2. Why is it important for us to understand the Trinity? For ourselves? For understanding other faith systems?
3. What is incorrect about the illustration that the Trinity is like "ice, water, and steam?"
4. Who was Tertullian and how did he describe the Trinity?
5. What does it mean to be a person and how (describe briefly) the members of the Trinity are shown to be persons in the biblical accounts of them?
6. What is the "Economic Trinity" and how does it work out in our salvation?
7. Are there any other questions, comments, or insights you have about the Trinity you'd like to discuss in your group?